

Musings of a paleontology community of practice at the Museum of Comparative Zoology

Ms Christina Byrd¹, Curatorial Associate, Entomology Crystal Maier¹, Curatorial Associate, Invertebrate Paleontology Jessica Cundiff¹

¹*Museum Of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, Cambridge, United States*

Paleontology collections at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) are spread across three departments and have historically been managed in various ways. We established the All-Paleontology Working Group in June 2020 with the purpose of standardizing practices and strengthening collaboration across the Entomology (Fossil Insect), Invertebrate Paleontology, and Vertebrate Paleontology departments. Inspired by the Paleo Data Working Group (an interinstitutional community of practice associated with iDigBio), the Curatorial Associates of each department decided that the best way to make improvements to the database records was through the formation of an institutional community of practice. A community of practice consists of people who engage in a process of collective learning who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This group was formed from a need to clean and georeference specimen collecting locality data, to share knowledge and resources, and to build connections with departments who can contribute to the goals of the group.

Curatorial staff from the three departments, along with staff from the Collections Operations Departments, meet monthly. Initial discussions revolved around georeferencing of shared localities. As work progressed, working group members identified areas for improvement and invited subject-matter experts to the meetings for their knowledge and implementation expertise. Later discussions focused on standardizing geologic data capture and database structure updates to capture data efficiently. We used Zoom for synchronous communication, email and Slack for asynchronous communication, and Microsoft SharePoint for collaborative spreadsheets and documents.

As solutions are developed at the institutional level, we can then communicate what we have learned to the interinstitutional communities of practice and professional societies, including the Paleo Data Working Group, the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC), and Biodiversity Information Standards (TDWG).

Referenced Literature:

Wenger-Trayner, E. and B. 2015, Introduction to communities of practice: A brief overview of the concept and its uses.

